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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a full review of the literature in the area of Gestalt Therapy and could be helpful in familiarizing people with this discipline. The roots contributing to the development of Gestalt therapy as presently practiced are explored briefly. Gestalt theory is presented in a developmental way, initially exploring the relationship between an organism and the environment. The paper also presents some basic guidelines or rules of Gestalt Therapy and some common Gestalt Therapy techniques such as games of dialogue, unfinished business, playing projections, reversing behavior, body movement and expression, the contact withdrawal rhythm, and dream work. Also provided are further resources for use in exploring Gestalt Therapy, including research demonstrating the effectiveness of Gestalt Therapy in group settings. The author concludes with a reminder that Gestalt Therapy can best be understood through direct experience with Gestalt therapists or people who have learned to follow their personal awareness continuum. (Author/CJ)

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GESTALT THERAPY: DEVELOPMENT, THEORY AND TECHNIQUES

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GESTALT THERAPY: DEVELOPMENT, THEORY AND TECHNIQUES

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This very wordy and theoretical paper puts together in one complete source a description of the development, theory and techniques of Gestalt therapy. It is a very complete review of the literature in the area of Gestalt therapy and could be helpful in becoming more familar with this discipline.

According to Enright (1968), Simkin (no date), Polster (1966), Wallen (1957), Naranjo (1968) and Petersen (1971) Gestalt Therapy was developed by Frederick S. Perls out of three distinct sources and influences. These are psychoanalysis (Polster, 1966, 1967; Naranjo, 1968), particularly as modified by Wilhelm Reich's interpretations (Foulds, 1970b; Enright, 1968; Naranjo, 1968), European Phenomenology-Existentialism (Foulds, 1972; Polster, 1966; Perls, 1965, 1966; Enright, 1968; Naranjo, 1968), and Gestalt psychology (Foulds, 1972; Enright, 1968; Wallen, 1957; Naranjo, 1968).

Perls (1969a) says "Gestalt is as ancient and old as the world itself. The world and especially every organism, maintains itself, and the only law which is constant is the forming of gestalts - wholes, completeness. A gestalt is an ultimate experiential unit (pg. 15)." Simkin (no date) describes "gestalt" as a word meaning whole or configuration. The term also implies a unique kind of patterning, an integration of members as contrasted with a summation of parts.

Academic Gestalt psychology, from which Gestalt therapy finds some of its roots, dealt largely with external figures, notably visual and auditory. The academic Gestalt psychologists, however never attempted to employ the various principles of gestalt formation, such as, proximity, the law of good continuation, similarity and so on. They also never really managed to integrate the facts of motivation with the facts of perception. It is this additional importation into Gestalt psychology that Perls made. To the external perceptions that the Gestalt psychologists Wertheimer and Kohler studied, the Gestalt therapist adds the figural perception of gestalten that form in the body and in the relationship of the individual to the environment (Wallen, 1957).

Gestalt therapy is considered an historical extension of psychoanalytic theory and methodology. However, while assimilating the original psychoanalytic foundations, Gestalt theory takes contrasting stands on many crucial therapeutic issues (Polster, 1967). How does Gestalt therapy contrast with the psychoanalytic doctrine from which it emerges? Polster (1967) points to four cornerstone concepts in psychoanalytic therapy and describes or illustrates the corresponding modifications which are also cornerstones of Gestalt therapy: (1) the concept of unconcious becomes figure-ground formation in Gestalt therapy; (2) psychoanalytic transference is contactfulness in Gestalt; (3) interpretation and insight in psychoanalysis becomes awareness in Gestalt therapy; and (4) free associations and dreams in psychoanalysis is modified as Gestalt therapy experiments.

Gestalt therapy's most specific link with psychoanalytic therapy lies

in its concern with body language. In this area Perls has expressed his indebtedness to Reich (Naranjo, 1968). Simkin (no date) provides a good summary "A thumbnail sketch of the aim of psychoanalysis has sometimes been given as Freud's dictum: 'Where Id was shall Ego be!' To replace the instinctual strivings with self control is mediated by the ego. A capsule comment describing Gestalt Therapy might be Perls': I and thou; Here and Now! (with a bow to the late professor Buber!) (pg. 1)."

Perls (1966) describes Gestalt therapy as one of the "...rebellious, humanistic, existential forces in psychology...(pg. 1)." It is existential in a very broad sense, as well as all of the existential schools emphasize direct experience, Gestalt therapy is truly experiential.

Foulds (1970b) provides a good summary of Gestalt therapy in a group setting: "Experiential-Gestalt group process consists of a relatively unstructured group experience which focuses primarily on the here-and-now, moment-to-moment experiencing of individual participants and the interactions among them. A primary value of this form of group process is reverance for experience, and its theoretical roots are in experiential psychotherapy (Gendlin, 1964, 1966, 1969; Malone, 1969; Warkentin, 1969; Whitaker & Malone, 1953) and in Gestalt therapy (Fagan & Shepherd, 1970; Perls, 1947, 1969a, 1969b; Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951) which is a blend of Gestalt psychology, existentialism, and Freudian psychology (Otto Rank & Wilhelm Reich interpretations, particularly). The experiential-Gestalt approach to group process combines experiential interaction procedures and the workshop model with individual focus of Fritz Perls(Pg. 1)."

This review will now take a look at the theory and techniques of Gestalt therapy. Despite the increasing involvement of psychotherapists in Gestalt therapy concepts and techniques, little written material is available, the exception being Perls's two early and still basic books, Ego, Hunger, and Aggression (1947), and Gestalt Therapy (1951). Fagan and Shepherd (1970), in a newer collection of Gestalt papers, point to three reasons for this scarcity of published material: (1) Perls showed little interest in creating a "school" of therapy as such; (2) with an emphasis on the here-and-now, and the avoidance of "aboutisms", most Gestalt therapists tend to be doers rather than sayers; and (3) with much importance being attached to tone of voice, posture, gestures, etc., transcribing Gestalt therapy into type becomes very difficult and loses much of the meaning and immediacy.

This review will present the theory and techniques of Gestalt therapy in a somewhat developmental way, beginning first with the organism and its environment. Perls, in Gestalt Therapy Verbatim (1969a) says: "What is an organism? We call an organism any living being...that has organs, has an organization, that is self-regulating, within itself. An organism is not independent from its environment. Every organism needs an environment to exchange essential substances, and so on...But within the organism there is a system of unbelievable subtlety; every cell of the millions of cells which we are, has built-in messages that it sends to the total organism, and the total organism then takes care of the needs of the cells and whatever must be done for different parts of the organism (pg. 5)."

One basic philosophy of Gestalt is that the organism always works as a whole, "rather than an entity split into dichotomies such as mind and body" (Simkin, no date, pg. 2), and cannot be separated from its environment. A

human being cannot survive if you take him out of his environment, deprive him of oxygen and food, etc. (Perls, 1969a). Experience occurs at the boundary between the organism and the environment, primarily at the skin surface and other organs of sensory and motor response; this is called the contact-boundary (Enright, 1968). Experience is the function of this boundary, and psychologically what is real are the "whole" configurations of this functioning, some meaning being achieved, some action completed, some gestalt. There is no single function of any animal that completes itself without objects and environment, whether one thinks of vegetative functions like nourishment and sexuality, or perceptual functions, or motor functions, or feeling, or reasoning. This interaction in any function occurs in and is called the organism/environment field (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951).

Gestalt therapists regard motor behavior and the perceptual qualities of the individual's experience as organized by the most relevant organismic need (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951; Wallen, 1957). Each most pressing need or unfinished situation in man assumes dominance and mobilizes all of the available effort until the task is completed; then it becomes indifferent and less concious, and the next pressing need claims attention. In this model we have the prototype of Gestalt formation and destruction, also known as "organismic self-regulation" (Simkin, no date; Perls, 1969a, 1970; Foulds, 1970b). This is described by Yontef (1972, pg. 3) as "When a need is met, the gestalt it organized becomes complete and it no longer exerts influence -- the organism is free to form new gestalten. When this gestalt formation and destruction are blocked or rigidified at any stage, when needs are not recognized and expressed, the flexible harmony and flow of the organism/environment field is disturbed. Unmet needs form incomplete gestalten that clamor for attention and, therefore, interfere with the formation of new gestalten."

It is immaterial whether the person is mature or immature by cultural standards, or whether an individual conforms to society or not. The important thing from a Gestalt point of view is that the integrated individual is a person in which this "gestalt formation and destruction process" is going on constantly without interruption (Wallen, 1957).

Related to this process is the concept of awareness, referring to the experience and description of current ongoing conditions in the individual's field. Awareness differs from insight through its continuing nature as an on-going process readily available, at all times, rather than the sporadic illuminations one might experience in special moments (Polster, 1967). Since the two legs on which Gestalt therapy walks are Now and How, attention to self-awareness emphasizes the "what", "how", and "where" of experience rather than the "why" attitudes which interpretations have fostered. As Perls (1969a, pg. 4) says: "Now covers all that exists; the past is no more, the future is not yet, only the now exists. How covers everything that is structure, behavior, everything that is actually going on - the on-going process. All the rest is irrelevant - computing, apprehending, and so on."

Perls (1951) calls the system of the organism's responses or contacts with the environment at any moment (here-and-now) the self. The ego is the system of identification and alienation of the organism; In neurosis the ego alienates some of the self processes, i.e., fails to identify with the self as it is. Rather than allow the self to proceed with the organization of responses into new gestalten, the self is crippled. The neurotic loses awareness of (alienates) the sense of "it is I who am thinking, feeling, doing

this (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951, pg. 235)." The neurotic is divided, unaware and self-rejecting.

Foulds (1970b) describes this division as voids or holes in the personality, maintained by several self-manipulative techniques which blot out awareness of experience: "Repression describes the process of blotting out experience, holding back excitement due to the experiencing of feelings, by developing muscular opposition to this energy system and engaging in self-hypnosis ...Thus repression is seen as a motor process...which is used to avoid awareness of and responsibility for unacceptable thoughts and feelings (pg. 50)."

Another common avoidance technique, projection, is the alienation of experiencing by attributing disowned aspects of oneself to other persons. Foulds (1972, pg. 50) says "This permits me to maintain the fantasy of how I imagine I am, and I can point my finger at the other and tell him how unacceptable he is." A third avoidance technqiue, desensitization, is the manipulation of the sensory system to avoid awareness of inner experiencing. Foulds (1970b, pg. 2) describes this as: "When I desensitize myself, I don't see (or I see only what I want to see), I don't hear (or I hear only what I want to hear), I don't feel, taste, etc." Wallen (1957), Enright (1968), Perls (1947, 1969a), and Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman (1951) also discuss these common avoidance techniques.

The goal in Gestalt therapy is maturity. Perls (1969a) looks at maturity as the "transcendence from environmental-support to self-support." The unborn baby gets all of its support from the mother (oxygen, food, warmth, etc.). As soon as the baby is born it has to already do its own breathing, movement from environmental-support to self-support. This process is achieved in the natural environment when there is struck a viable balance of support and frustration. Gestalt therapists attempt to balance support and frustration facilitating this movement towards self-support (Yontef, 1972).

The important aspects of Gestalt therapy are covered in Gestalt Therapy (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951), and in a more up-to-date form by Perls in Gestalt Therapy Verbatim (1969a) and In and Out of the Garbage Pail (1969b), if the reader wants to further investigate the theoretical background of Gestalt therapy.

This review will now center its attention on the techniques of Gestalt therapy. The techniques of Gestalt therapy belong to two sets of guidelines, either <u>rules</u> or <u>games</u>. The rules are few and are expressed and described at the outset. The games, though, are numerous and no definitive list is possible since an ingenious Gestalt therapist may devise new ones from moment to moment. The rules definitely are not intended as a dogmatic list of do's and don't's, rather, they are offered in the spirit of experiment to facilitate the maturation process (Levitsky & Perls, 1970).

The following statement by Levitsky and Perls (1970, pg. 140) is helpful: "True to its heritage in Gestalt psychology, the essence of Gestalt therapy is in the perspective with which it views human life processes; seen in this light, any particular set of techniques such as our presently used rules and games which will be regarded as convenient means - useful tools for our purposes but without sancrosanct qualities."

The rules include:
(1) <u>the principle of the now</u>; Levitsky and Perls (1970, pg. 140-141) state:

"The idea of the now, of the immediate moment, of the content and structure of present experience is one of the most potent, most pregnant, and most elusive principles of Gestalt Therapy." Now is a functional concept referring to what the organism is doing. What the organism did five minutes ago is not part of the now. An act of remembering a childhood event is now, i.e., the remembering is now (Yontef, 1972). Gestalt therapy experiments operate in the now in this functional sense (Levitsky & Perls, 1970). The Gestalt therapist attempts to keep the focus on the present ongoing situation and on what "is". The discussion of history (the past) is discouraged, while relating authentically in the now and communicating in the present tense is encouraged. We can remember the past (which is no more) and anticipate the future (which is not yet), but only the now exists (Foulds, 1972, pg. 49)."

(2) I and thou; Gestalt therapy involves the interaction of at least two people, in individual therapy, the patient and the therapist (Simkin, no date). Polster (1966, pg. 5-6) describes the I-thou relationship: "...encounter, the interaction between patient and therapist, each of whom is in the present moment a culmination of a life's experiences. They may engage simply, saying and doing those things which are pertinent to their needs, the therapist offering a new range of possibility to the patient through his willingness to know the truth and to be an authentic person."

(3) "It" language and "I" language; this rule deals with the semantics of responsibility and involvement; as it is common for persons to refer to their bodies, acts, and behaviors in the third person, "it" language. Instead of "it is trembling" (referring to the hand), say "I am trembling". Through the simple, and seemingly mechanical, method of changing "it" language into "I" language a person learns to identify more clearly with the particular behavior in question and to assume responsibility for it (Levitsky & Perls, 1970). Changing "it" to "I" is one example of the Gestalt game techniques which allow a person to more fully experience who they are and assume responsibility for themselves. Some of these are expressed by Foulds (1972, pg. 51): "If and but are replaced by and, I can't is replaced by I won't, I feel by I am, and I feel guilty by I resent and I demand. It and you are changed to I, and verbs are substituted for nouns. Why, because, should, ought, supposed to, and have to are worked with in depth by asking the person to verbalize his rationalizations."

(4) Use of the awareness continuum; the use of the awareness continuum, the "how" of experience, is absolutely basic to Gestalt therapy. Many of the Gestalt-awareness experiments direct a person to their awareness continuum. Levitsky and Perls (1970, pg. 143) say: "The awareness continuum has inexhaustible applications. Primarily, however, it is an affective way of guiding the individual to the firm bedrock of his experience and away from the endless verbalizations, explanations, interpretations. Awareness of body feelings and of sensations and perceptions constitutes our most certain - perhaps our only certain - knowledge. Relying on information provided in awareness is the best method of implementing Perls's dictum 'lose your mind and come to your senses."

(5) No gossiping; As with other Gestalt techniques, the no gossiping rule is designed to promote direct confrontation of feelings and to prevent avoidance of feelings. Gossiping is defined as "talking about an individual when he is actually present and could just as well be addressed directly (Levitsky & Perls, 1970, pg. 144).

The following is a list describing some of the more common Gestalt therapy techniques:

(1) Games of dialogue; In trying to effect integrated functioning, the Gestalt therapist seeks out whatever divisions or splits manifested in the personality. One split is the famous "top-dog" and "under-dog"; the top-dog moralizes, specializes in shoulds, and is bossy and condemning, while the under-dog remains passively resistent, making excuses and finding reasons for delay (Levitsky & Perls, 1970). When the top- and under-dog split, as well as other conflicts appear, the patient is asked to create an actual dialogue between the two components of self. The dialogue game can also be used for various parts of the body (i.e., right hand vs. left hand, lower half of body vs. upper half). The dialogue can also be developed between the patient and some significant person, whether the significant other is present or not. The patient simply addresses the person, in the here-and-now, imagines a response, then replies to the response, and so on.

(2) Unfinished business; Whenever unfinished business (unresolved feelings) is identified, the patient is asked to complete it. The dialogue is one method for expressing unfinished business with a significant person. Unfinished business may prevent other behavior from occuring smoothly.

(3) Playing the projection; A patient looks around the room and picks an object that stands out vividly for him. He then identifies with his object, i.e., making statements as if he were the object; describing it by saying "I" instead of "it". Interesting knowledge occurs when using this technique (Enright, 1971). Another way of using this technique is, for example, a person who says "I can't trust you" may be asked to play the role of an untrustworthy person to discover his own inner conflict in this area (Levitsky & Perls, 1970)."

(4) Reversals; One way a Gestalt therapist approaches certain symptoms and difficulties is to help the patient to realize that most behavior commonly represents the reversal of underlying or latent impulses. The person is asked to role-play the opposite of a particular feeling or behavior that he is manifesting to excess, (i.e., the patient claims to suffer from inhibition; he will be asked to play an exhibitionist). The person is asked to be very sensitive to his experience in playing reversals, and to be aware of tapping into previously unrecognized feelings (Foulds, 1970b).

(5) The contact and withdrawal rhythm; Levitsky and Perls (1970) say: "The neutral inclination towards withdrawal from contact, which the patient will experience from time to time, is not dealt with as resistance to be overcome but as a rhythmic respinse to be respected (pg. 147)." When a patient wishes to withdraw, he is asked to close his eyes and withdraw in fantasy to any place or situation in which he feels secure. He describes the scene and his feelings as he experiences his withdrawal; and then he returns to the room to further share the experience.

(6) Body movement; When a patient shows incongruences, often attending to one aspect of his communication and not another, this is reported to him (i.e., verbal content is incongruent or inconsistent with tone of voice, or the posture of the patient) (Yontef, 1972). One way to work with this is to ask the patient to exagerate the movement repeatedly, so that he may become aware of the subtle feelings that are motivating the movement and release the energy and excitement he is holding back (Foulds, 1970b). What is often dis-

covered is that the body speaks more honestly than the verbal content.

(7) The "I take responsibility" game; Gestalt therapy considers all overt behavior, sensing, feeling, and thinking acts by the person. Patients frequently disown or alienate these acts by using the "it" language, passive voice, etc. One technique involves asking the patient to add after each statement he makes "...and I take responsibility for it" (Levitsky and Perls, 1970). Foulds (1972) calls this identification or "owning" (pg. 50).

(8) Dream work; In Gestalt therapy dreams are used to integrate, not interpret. Perls (1970) stated that the dream is the "Royal road to integration (pg. 204)", and is "an existential message of whats missing in our lives, what we avoid doing and living (Perls, 1969a, pg. 76)." Perls lets the person act out his dream. Since he regards each part of the dream as a projection, each fragment of the dream (i.e., person, prop, or mood) is considered an alienated part of the individual. The person plays each part and an encounter ensues between the divided parts (in first person, singular) frequently leading to integration (Yontef, 1972).

These have been the most thoroughly discussed and most widely used techniques in Gestalt therapy. The reader can look further at Gestalt therapy techniques in Gestalt Therapy (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951), Awareness (Stevens, 1971), and The Experiential-Gestalt Growth Group Experience (Foulds, 1972). Gestalt Therapy Resources (Kogan, 1972) identifies, through a bibliography, fields (i.e., education, community development, art, religion, mental health) and types of populations (i.e., teenagers, children, probation officers, teachers, families, couples, college students) in which Gestalt therapy has made contributions. Recent research investigations have demonstrated the effectiveness of the experiential-Gestalt approach for fosering personal growth in relatively healthy growth-oriented individuals (Foulds, 1970b). Other research efforts using the Gestalt approach with college students include Foulds (1970a, 1971a, 1971b, 1972a, 1972b) and Guinan and Foulds (1970).

I have attempted through these many, many words to provide a thorough review of Gestalt therapy, including its development, theory and techniques. The writing of and reading of this worthy wordy production is certainly in opposition to learning much about Gestalt therapy or the Gestalt way-of-life. The truelearning can only come from a direct experience with a Gestalt therapist or person involved with the Gestalt way-of-life. Open your eyes and ears and inner senses to your personal experience and only then will you begin to understand what Gestalt therapy is all about. Gestalt therapy is MY EXPERIENCE and YOUR EXPERIENCE and not really all of the words in this paper; these words are for the intellectual who may or may not be intouch with any personal experience below his head (from the neck down). My writing this paper comes in a response to many folks asking me to tell them about Gestalt therapy, and yet my experience of them was they didn't want to do any work in the process of learning -- so here is a paper for you to read. True, this paper may be helpful to those of you who also have been and are wanting to do some more work in expanding your lives.

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